

Brief Summary of the General Debate

33. In a statement to the Conference at its 1st plenary meeting, on 5 June 1972, the Secretary-General of the Conference, Maurice F. Strong, stated that the high level of participation in the Conference was most encouraging; it was greatly to be hoped that the reasons for the absence from the Conference of some countries which had played such an important role in the preparatory process—reasons which were not related to environmental issues—would soon be resolved, and that those countries would be actively involved in dealing with the tasks presented by the problems of the human environment.

34. The Conference was launching a new liberation movement to free men from the threat of their thralldom to environmental perils of their own making. The movement could succeed only if there was a new commitment to liberation from the destructive forces of mass poverty, racial prejudice, economic injustice, and the technologies of modern warfare. Mankind's whole work and dedication must be towards the ideal of a peaceful, habitable and just planet.

35. The Conference could not deal with all the ills of the world, but if it successfully accomplished the important work before it, it would establish a new and more hopeful basis for resolving the seemingly intractable problems that divided mankind. It had to be recognized that the physical interdependence of all people required new dimensions of economic, social and political interdependence. Better means would have to be devised for making knowledge available to decision-makers and to those who would be affected by decisions.

36. Developing countries could ill-afford to put uncertain future needs ahead of their immediate needs for food, shelter, work, education and health care. The problem was how to reconcile those legitimate immediate requirements with the interests of generations yet unborn. Environmental factors must be an integral part of development strategy; one of the most encouraging outcomes of the preparatory process had been the emergence of a new synthesis between development and environment.

37. The concept of "no growth" could not be a viable policy for any society, but it was necessary to rethink the traditional concepts of the basic purposes of growth.

38. The vast benefits which the new technological order had produced were undeniable, but man's activities had created serious imbalances. Not only each society but the world as a whole must achieve a better balance among the major elements that determined the level and quality of life it could provide for its members—population and its distribution, available resources and their exploitation, and pressures placed on the life systems that sustained it.

39. Conference action was required on the proposed Declaration on the Human Environment; on the proposed Action Plan for the Human Environment; on the proposed Environment Fund—which would be additional to moneys, which Governments made available for development programmes; and on the vitally needed organizational and financial machinery by which it would be possible to continue the work begun with the calling of the Conference.

40. Certain priorities that required urgent and large-scale action had emerged from the preparatory process; these included water supplies, ocean and sea pollution, and the urban crisis. In addition, there were other areas for priority action: the need for understanding and controlling the changes man produced in the major ecological systems; the need for accelerating the dissemination of environmentally sound technologies and for developing alternatives to existing harmful technologies; the need to avoid commitment to new technologies before adequately assessing their environmental consequences; the need to encourage broader international distribution of industrial capacity; and the need to assist developing countries to minimize environmental risks in their development strategies.

41. Looking beyond the Conference, he stressed the need for:

(a) New concepts of sovereignty, based not on the surrender of national sovereignties but on better means of exercising them collectively, and with **a greater sense of responsibility for the common good;**

(b) New codes of international law which the era of environmental concern required, and new means of dealing with environmental conflicts;

(c) New international means for better management of the world's common property resources;

(d) New approaches to more automatic means of financing programmes of international cooperation, which could include levies and tolls on certain forms of international transport or on the consumption of certain non-renewable resources.

42. The general debate covered a vast range of environmental problems confronting nations and individuals, organizations and institutions. In the course of 11 plenary meetings held from 6 to 12 June 1972, the Conference was addressed by representatives of Member States, United Nations bodies, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.

43. Throughout the general debate, speakers expressed their gratitude to the Government of Sweden for its initiative and hospitality, to the President for his distinguished conduct of the Conference, and to the Chair-man and members of the Preparatory Committee and the Secretary-General of the Conference and his staff for their invaluable work in the preparatory process. Several speakers said that, as the problems the world was facing were universal, those problems could only be resolved by universal action. They regretted the fact that certain nations were not present at the Conference. Other delegations underlined the fact that in the convening of the Conference the fundamental principle of universality enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations had not been respected. The following brief summary of a lengthy and deeply informed debate attempts to emphasize the dominant themes.

Development and environment

44. Considerable emphasis was placed by speakers from developing countries upon the fact that for two-thirds of the world's population the human environment was dominated by poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy and misery, and that the urgent task facing mankind was to solve those immediate and formidable problems. The priority of developing countries was development. Until the gap between the poor and the rich countries was substantially narrowed, little if any progress could be made in improving the human environment. Many speakers from developing countries agreed, however, that environmental considerations would have to be incorporated into national development strategies in order to avoid the mistakes made by developed countries in their development, to utilize human and natural resources more efficiently, and to enhance the quality of life of their peoples. Many speakers endorsed the statement of the Secretary-General of the Conference that there need be no clash between the concern for development and the concern for the environment, that support for environmental action must not be an excuse for reducing development, and that there must be a substantial increase in development assistance with due consideration for environmental factors. There was also general agreement that a philosophy of "no growth" was absolutely unacceptable.

45. Many speakers from developing countries stated that there was exploitation of their natural resources by developed countries for their own purposes; some protested against the activities of certain multinational corporations.

Many representatives also stressed that there was exploitation of international marine resources by developed countries, which had a direct effect upon developing countries.

46. The need for more effective and less wasteful utilization of natural resources was underlined by several speakers.

47. In the opinion of many speakers, the only criterion of the success of environmental programmes was the substantial improvement of the conditions of life of the vast majority of mankind. To achieve this, there must be an entirely new attitude on the part of the developed countries towards their responsibilities. Many speakers from developing countries urged the relaxation of protectionist trade barriers against their products, and several warned against the danger that developed countries might raise the prices of their goods to meet costs incurred in environmental reforms; it would be intolerable if the nations which had created the world's environmental problems should expect others to meet the cost.

48. Many speakers, from both developing and developed countries, agreed that the ruthless pursuit of gross national product, without consideration for other factors, produced conditions of life that were an affront to the dignity of man. The requirements of clean air, water, shelter and health were undeniable needs and rights of man.

49. The need for regional cooperation among developing countries was mentioned by many speakers.

Some said that it was only through national initiatives and work that the problems of developing countries could be solved; others added that such initiatives and work should be undertaken with regional and global cooperation. The need for technical and scientific assistance for the developing countries was emphasized by many speakers, as was the importance of effective international dissemination of information.

50. Several speakers expressed concern at the inadequacy of existing knowledge concerning environmental problems, and stressed the urgent need to initiate international research programmes the results of which would be freely available to all. Some speakers considered that the establishment of such

programmes would be the most important single contribution that the proposed body, which would be charged with the work that the Conference had initiated, could make in its formative stage. Several speakers considered, however, that that would not be sufficient, and that the basic need was for a major

programme of education in the poorer countries, as it was only through the eradication of illiteracy and ignorance in all sectors of society that mankind could hope to improve its opportunities and conditions of life.

Draft Declaration on the Human Environment

51. Many speakers stressed the importance, which they attached to the proposed Declaration on the Human Environment. Several expressed the hope that the draft Declaration set out in document A/CONF.48/4 would not be amended, and that the carefully constructed consensus achieved in pre-Conference consultations would not be imperiled. Others, while expressing dissatisfaction with parts of the Declaration—particularly in regard to what they considered to be its inadequate appreciation of the needs of developing countries—accepted the declaration. Others, however, took the view that the Declaration was of such importance that those countries which had not had the opportunity of expressing their opinions in the course of the preparatory process should be entitled to express them during the Conference and propose alterations.

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Action Plan

52. The Action Plan outlined in document A/CONF.48/5 was in general well received; many speakers emphasized that the value of the preparatory process and of the Conference would be completely negated unless they resulted in positive action by individual nations, regional organizations, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the United Nations. Many speakers pointed out that different problems required different solutions, and that any realistic plan must take full note of that fact. The importance of the active involvement of the scientific community was stressed by many speakers, and the value to all mankind of the Earthwatch programme was emphasized. Many speakers referred to the necessity for public involvement, particularly that of youth, and the support of public interest, in environmental matters; action would not be taken unless there was public demand for it, and it would not be effective unless it had public support.

Institutional arrangements

53. The proposal for the establishment of an intergovernmental body on the human environment was generally welcomed. Some speakers considered that it should be a body of the General Assembly, while others argued that it should be a commission of the Economic and Social Council. Some speakers were in favour of a body

composed of 27 members; others considered that number too small. Emphasis was placed by many speakers on the need for effective regional cooperation, since many environmental problems were capable of solution only by regional collaborative action. Several speakers pointed to the danger of duplication of effort inherent in the creation of too many organizations. Representatives of the specialized agencies drew attention to their existing programmes.

54. The proposal for a small permanent secretariat unit for the new inter-governmental body was also generally supported. In the debate, some speakers mentioned United Nations locations in New York and Geneva; speakers from Austria, India, Kenya, Malta, Mexico, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland invited such a secretariat to establish itself in their countries.

Environment Fund

55. The proposed Environment Fund was supported by many speakers. Several delegations announced their intention of making contributions to the Fund. Concern was expressed by some representatives of developing countries that the Fund might be regarded by some developed countries as an alternative to development assistance. Some speakers emphasized the need to use the Fund to help developing countries meet the additional environmental costs incurred in their development programmes. Several speakers endorsed the argument that "the polluter must pay".

56. In addition to discussing the Fund, several speakers agreed with the proposal of the Secretary General of the United Nations for the provision of levies as a source of finance for the Fund. It was also proposed that a world many housing programme should be established to extend technical assistance to developing countries in the faceted aspects of human settlements.

Population

57.

Several speakers expressed regret that population problems took so minor a place in the agenda of the Conference. They argued that all strategies for development and environment would be fatally damaged unless the rate of population increase was reduced. Other speakers said that the population increase was not the problem; the real challenge was the fact that so large a number of the people of the world had such a small expectation for a fruitful, happy and long life. In the opinion of certain delegations there was no incompatibility between population growth and preservation of the environment.

Conservation

58. It was emphasized by several speakers that conservation of natural resources must be an integral part of sound development and environmental programmes, and that this was not a luxury but an absolute necessity. Many speakers described actions taken in their countries to protect areas of land and its wildlife. The preservation of all forms of life on the planet was described by many speakers as being a crucial part of the strategy to enhance and protect the human environment now and in the future.

Marine pollution

59. The problem of marine pollution was stressed by many speakers. Contamination of the oceans had global consequences, affecting peoples many thousands of miles away from the source of pollution. Mention was made of natural disasters at sea, oil discharges, excessive use of pesticides, and atmospheric pollution, which eventually contaminated the sea. Several speakers welcomed recent international action to curtail ocean dumping. Particular reference was also made to the problems of certain seas, which could be solved

only by regional cooperation and action.

Other issues

60. A considerable number of important matters affecting the human environment-both immediately and in the future-were raised in the general debate. Many speakers described actions, which their countries or organizations had taken or proposed to take in order to solve particular national, regional and international environmental problems. The environmental effects of pesticides and fertilizers were mentioned by several speakers, some of whom urged the development of safe and cheap alternatives to those pesticides and fertilizers that had been found to be harmful. Some speakers were highly critical of the development of supersonic aircraft, which, they claimed, could have harmful global effects. Others pointed to the ever present problem of natural disasters, and put forward suggestions for improved advance warning and for steps to limit damage. The difficulties of agricultural countries were described and analyzed, as were those of nations with substantial urban problems. Many speakers stressed the importance of preventive action and the necessity of taking early steps to discover and prevent serious environmental hazards. To that end, the importance of the exchange of scientific and technological information and experience, through the proposed referral system, was mentioned by several representatives. There were also suggestions for annual reminders to the public, by means of named dates or a week, of the importance of preventing environmental hazards.

61. The representative of Iran announced that his country had selected an area of 130,000 hectares constituting an ecosystem of global importance, which it was prepared to place in joint trust with an appropriate international agency to conserve and administer for the benefit of all mankind. He further announced the establishment by Iran of an annual prize of \$20,000, for the most outstanding contribution in the field of the human environment, to be awarded through the good offices of the Secretary-General of the Conference.

62. Some delegations emphasized that any discussion of the problems of the human environment could not exclude international conflicts, the suppression of human rights, apartheid, nuclear testing, the offensive presence of foreign naval forces in seas near their countries, and made to the proliferation of armaments. References were the situations in Indo-China, the Middle East, and in southern Africa. Other representatives argued that such matters, although of substantial importance, should be discussed in other organs of the United Nations and were not appropriate to the Conference. Several representatives expressed strong criticism of the decision of certain nations participating in the Conference, which proposed to continue nuclear testing. Others said that the armaments race and stockpiling of arms of mass destruction nuclear, chemical,

bacteriological and conventional weapons-should be condemned since they represented a menace to the environment and to humanity itself.

63. With reference to the proposal for the convening of a second United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Canada and Mexico offered to act as host.

64. The view was often expressed that man possessed the skills to foresee and avert ecological misfortunes and to create a much happier and richer world, but that no positive advances could be made without the political will. It was repeatedly emphasized that it was only by means of global cooperation, understanding, sympathy and assistance that mankind could achieve the results that his talents could provide.



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